

Lithuanian Soldiers Are Outcasts in Soviet Army

By ESTHER B. FEIN

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VILNIUS, Lithuania, March 21 — Virginijus Vitkauskas came to the Lithuanian government's Commission on Military Service this morning, his right eye swollen and purple and his upper teeth punched out. He was the victim, he said, of soldiers in his unit, who said they would teach the young Lithuanian what they thought of his republic's drive for independence.

A volunteer worker at the commission gently patted his back, took down his story, then sent a telegram to his military unit, saying that the 19-year-old was now under the charge of the commission and that he would not return.

The commission, which has been operating for nearly a year now, describes its task as the protection of Lithuanian recruits who have run away from the army, complaining of harassment or abuse or saying they have suffered nervous breakdowns and illnesses that the military ignored or mistreated. There are even some who deserted because, they said, they felt they could not in good conscience serve the Soviet Army.

The Growing Tension

But in the 10 days since Lithuania declared its independence, setting off an onslaught of official denunciations and warnings, the commission's small staff has been inundated each day by dozens of soldiers looking for shelter from the Soviet military. Their stories emphasize the severe tension that has been growing between the renegade republic and much of the rest of the Soviet Union.

"These boys see no other choice but to get out," said Gidima Mikulskiene, an economist who has been volunteering at the commission for a week. "They are pressured psychologically and physically. They are humiliated. They just say they are from Lithuania and that's reason enough for the others to start beating them. And there is nobody who will defend them. Nobody. It has gotten significantly worse since the declaration on statehood, and more and more are coming to us for help."

Dilemma for Lithuanian Leaders

The new Lithuanian leaders seem unsure about how to deal with the nearly 35,000 Lithuanian soldiers caught outside the republic's borders when independence was declared, and they have been waffling in their strategy.

At first the leaders invited all their soldiers to come home immediately. Then, realizing that such a move could be interpreted by the Soviet authorities as a provocation, they appealed to the soldiers to remain with their units while the new government negotiated with the Kremlin.

But in a meeting this week with the commander of the Baltic Military District, the new Lithuanian president, Vytautas Landsbergis, said Lithuanians would not be reporting for the



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Reports of abuse are common among servicemen returning to Lithuania.

spring call-up next month. And the authorities here show no signs of enforcing a Moscow order that all deserters return to their regular posts by Saturday. They have also said they will continue to protect all those who come to them.

The Soldiers Who Flee

By early morning, the line begins forming outside the commission's office at the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet.

There are young men in stiff new uniforms, who say that as citizens of an independent Lithuania, they want to serve in a Lithuanian army, not a Soviet one. There are teen-agers with

Recruits run away, afraid of harassment.

short hair, some with bruised faces or broken bones.

There are mothers and fathers who say they are worried that their sons will come home from the army physically or emotionally wounded, and recent high-school graduates who say they are afraid to answer their call to the draft.

On the heels of these people, there are also frequent visits by military officials looking for particular soldiers who have disappeared from their post or failed to return after scheduled vacation. Usually the officials come in civilian clothing, but their interest in specific cases gives them away.

"The only information we give them is whether we have sent a telegram on behalf of someone," said Liudvika Pociuniene, a commission volunteer. "We won't tell them when the kid came or anything else. But we also tell the kids that they have to be on their guard. They should not stay at home; they should never be alone. Maybe they

should spend some time in the country and keep a low profile. Unfortunately, we cannot protect them if the army comes knocking at their door."

A More Difficult Role

The head of the commission, Dalia Taraliene, said the work had become far more difficult since the Lithuanian Parliament voted on March 11 to restore independent statehood and to suspend the Soviet Constitution in Lithuania.

Before, she said, she had developed an unofficial understanding with the Soviet military authorities: They would routinely approve the commission's recommendations for soldiers to be hospitalized or transferred to new posts in the Baltic republics, and the commission would assume all responsibility for the young men.

From last May 3, when the commission began its work, until March 1, Mrs. Taraliene said, the cases of some 1,500 soldiers were handled. Free from public pressure and scrutiny, commission members managed to come up with concrete reasons, acceptable to the army, why these young men should not return to their assigned units.

In that period, Mrs. Taraliene said, there were 167 deserters, 55 of whom were found by doctors to be suffering from severe trauma or emotional problems and placed in psychiatric hospitals.

"Now, Soviet laws are not valid here," she said, her conversation continually disrupted by mothers knocking at her door or telephoning, seeking advice. "There are still no new Lithuanian laws and our hands are basically tied trying to do something concrete to help these poor boys."

One Soldier's Story

Four days ago, Giedrius Bielevicius said, he was in the barracks of his military unit in Minsk, the Byelorussian capital, when he decided he could no longer take the insults that other soldiers hurled at him and fellow Lithuanian recruits. They were called fascists and frequently threatened with violence.

After bed check that night, he ran to the home of friends. They gave him a change of clothes and money for a train ticket, and by late night he was heading back to Lithuania.

"I served in three units and one was worse than the next," said the 19-year-old soldier, who came to the commission today with his wife. "I had enough. The Soviet Union is not my homeland. Lithuania is my homeland, and I will protect her with all my might. I knew that before, but when I got on that train I really felt it. For the first time, I felt inside like a free man."